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Casteism continues to thrive among Indians abroad – through surnames.

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Casteism continues to thrive among Indians abroad – through surnames.

Most members of the diaspora believe they are anti-caste and progressive, and yet their caste identity remains important to them.
A few years ago, two of us, newly-arrived academics in a small town in Sweden, went to a supermarket on the university campus. We spotted a South Asian man, talking to his child in Hindi. The man noticed us too. With a smile on his face, he walked up to us for an introduction, but our names, it turned out, did not satisfy him. "Surname?" the man asked. He was insistent.

“Kumar what?”, he asked in response to one answer, and gleefully acknowledged the other answer with the exclamation “Kayasth”. The conversation ended with him informing us of his Brahmin caste.

To some caste-practicing South Asians, this may seem a casual conversation, especially since the man probably had no intent to discriminate. Nevertheless, what happened was a couched assertion of a superior identity, the socio-cultural hierarchical placing of his identity in relation to ours. Asking last names is often how some educated Indian elites politely insinuate their caste. But who gets to ask the caste of others and why? That too, in a foreign land, where there are limited opportunities to practice caste-based inquiry unless people who believe in caste are in a position of authority.

This question is more salient in light of California suing technology giant Cisco over the allegation that an engineer faced discrimination at its Silicon Valley headquarters because he is Dalit. An op-ed

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on the case in *The New York Times* pointed out that in one of the first caste surveys in the US in 2018, 59% of the 1,200 South Asian participants had experienced casteist insults and jokes. A quarter of them had witnessed physical assault because of their caste, and half were afraid of being outed as Dalits.

Caste Habitus

To understand why the surname conversation is closely linked with caste privilege, it is important to unravel how caste operates. French philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is useful in understanding the widespread absorption of caste in everyday life. For Bourdieu, habitus is a normative world that shapes the actions and behaviours of individuals inhabiting it. It is a set of dispositions that the individual learns and imitates as they grow. It shapes their instant cognitive response and bodily behaviour, which prompts what they say and don't say, what is commonsensical and scandalous, the impossible and the probable, the

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reasonable and the unreasonable. The habitus creates these responses as natural, given and unproblematic, and people further reproduce this habitus through their responses and interactions with others.

Caste is a habitus. It generates certain normative principles and taken-for-granted behaviours that an individual absorbs over time from family, society and the world, and manifests through their body, behaviour and cognitive response. Caste, as an ideology and practice, evolved to divide the human society among the upper three varnas (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas); “low and inferior” Shudras (“lower castes”); and Atishudras (the outcaste Dalits, whose only existence was to serve the three higher varnas). For social elites, as political scientist Gopal Guru notes, the affirmation of caste brings power, status and ego. But for the others, it brings low-paid, degrading manual labour, along with outcaste status, humiliation and suffering. The job of the caste habitus, then, is to safeguard this division in normal times and times of crises.

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It normalises and justifies hierarchy, difference, violence, humiliation and systemic othering of the lower castes and Dalits. This habitus is inculcated from childhood through families, schooling, everyday conversations, conflicts, media, texts, and covert and overt violence.

Usually, the habitus requires a space (educational institutions, workspace, housing, households, etc.) where caste inequality can be practiced. But it can also be produced and reproduced by casual, spontaneous conversations and by objectifying the surname culture. In the West, which is home to a large Indian diaspora, personal and cultural domain takes a central role in reproducing the caste habitus.

For instance, an educated upper-caste father, who proclaims to be indifferent to caste hierarchy, once comforted her anti-caste daughter while she was undergoing a tough phase of life in the US by saying, "When in doubt, remember you are a Brahmin's daughter and keep your head high."

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There are many such examples where the self is couched in a caste hierarchy.

A number of high caste communities in the US organise “sacred thread” ceremonies for their children and educate them about their cultural position. Admittedly, these people may not necessarily practice caste-based discrimination, but what they should not forget is that it is an ancient discriminatory practice which, according to historian RS Sharma, was explicitly denied to lower castes and women.

This caste habitus is further sustained by endogamous marriages and their advertisements. Shaadi.com, one of the leading matrimonial sites for diasporic Indians, offers a searchable database that classifies caste under community and the drop-down menu shows more than 60 kinds of subdivisions in the Brahmin category alone. For the rest, there is every caste and sub-caste possible to choose from. Kareem Khubchandani, a cultural theorist, while discussing the “absent” caste in the popular Netflix show *Indian Matchmaking*, points

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out how American reality dating shows refer to the participants only by their first name. In this show, however, every potential match is referred to by the first and last name. This could be because, as Khubchandani explains, last names reveal and silence any tension about where we come from.

Another example of how the caste habitus works is the app Indian Caste Hub, which categorises and classifies surnames with their caste affiliations. Its tagline – "Search any surname, find which caste it belongs to" – is a tragic reminder that the claim of many urban, educated Indians and non-resident Indians that we live in a post-caste society is not even remotely defensible. Against the background of these examples and context, our supermarket incident reveals how caste spills into the public sphere to create a diasporic self that is entrenched in caste – its members think, we are educated, anti-caste and progressive, but the caste identity is nevertheless important.

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History of Oppression

The caste habitus itself evolves over time through interaction and response. For example, in the light of a growing anti-caste discourse and legal regime, asking one's caste directly is perhaps offensive. But asking surnames is still considered permissible. To challenge this evolving structuring of the caste habitus, it is important to understand the privilege that surnames produce. Last names are a deeply political category and sometimes carry a cruel history of oppression. In an article in *The Atlantic*, Edward Delman mentions some state-led programmes meant to create homogenous identities, such as Spanish colonisers dictating Filipinos' surnames, and the Communist Bulgaria authorities deciding Turk and Bulgarian Muslims surnames in the 1980s. The surname history of the Jews living in Central and Eastern Europe depicts the power of the early modern states and dominant people controlling the lives of the marginalised using naming hierarchy.

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Joseph II, the ruler of the Habsburg empire, while granting Jews the same rights as Christians, asked them to strictly adopt German first names and family names in 1781. Nelly Weiss writes in *The Origin of Jewish Family Names* that Jews' names were often decided by civic authorities, who chose the humiliating Kanalgeruch (sewer's stink) and Ostertag (Easter). The state authorities, on their part, created surnames from plants' names (Rosenzweig, Mandelbaum), stones (Steinberg, Steinmann), physical appearance (Gross, Lang, Kurz), and occupations (Koch, Schmied, Zimmermann). It was no surprise then that when Israel was founded, many Jews with humiliating and European-sounding names adopted Hebrew names.

India has a much older tradition of the surname culture, but it acquired a unique character because of the caste system. Vedic literature (1500-1000 BC) mentions names with surnames that were derived from the name of the father, mother, gotra (clan) and locality. Later, however, Grihyasutras (literature on domestic rituals from

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600-300 BC) and Manusmriti (lawbook written by Brahmanical scholar Manu around 200-400 AD) proposed caste-based hierarchized surname conventions. Both said that Brahmins could end their names with Śarman (happiness or blessing), Kshatriyas with Varman (strength and protection), Vaishyas with Gupta (prosperity), Shudras with Dasa/Das (slave, service and dependence). Manu also recommended that Brahmin names should indicate auspiciousness (mangla), Kshatriya names strength, Vaishya names wealth, and Shudra names lowness and contempt.

One can note similarities between what Joseph II and his officials ordered for Jews in the 18th and 19th century and what the Brahmanical lawmakers prescribed for the lowest castes in the 1st and 2nd century. In both cases, surnames became the markers of humiliation and a degraded status for a section of humanity. RS Sharma says that in the post-Vedic period, Brahmanical lawmakers set such bigoted rules that a Shudra could not call the upper varnas by

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their names while greeting them. However, their rules were not always followed. The lower castes often did not stick to the Das surname – they either did not have a surname or used their village name or father's name.

Asserting their Identity

The caste-based surname culture solidified under the British colonial regime, which gave primacy to Brahmanical laws and a caste/community-based understanding of the society. With regard to lower castes and Dalits, a new politics of status assertion and anti-caste politics emerged in colonial India, which brought a new surname culture. Ramnarayan Rawat points to the struggles of educated north Indian Dalits (Chamar caste) in using respectable, assertive surnames such as Yadav, Jatav, Yaduvanshi instead of humiliating surnames. There was also, as William Pinch notes, a conceptual reconfiguration of the word Das (a slave) by lower castes who, influenced by the Bhakti

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movement, linked the term to their devotion to deities than to the caste hierarchy.

This gave rise to names such as Ram Das, Chhote Kishan Das. A sharper critique of the caste-based surname culture emerged with the rise of Sikhism. Its religious advocates argued for the abolition of all caste surnames, except for Kaur (for women) and Singh (for men) to eradicate caste distinctions. In practice, though, caste surnames did not totally disappear, and Kaur/Singh sometimes became middle names. After independence, India saw the rise of a more contested surname culture as a result of identity politics, anti-caste movements and greater assertion of the non-Bahujan identity against affirmative action. Further complicating the matter were gendered surnames.

It is possible to envision a more humane habitus in which we rethink our implementation of last names. But achieving it may not be as easy as dropping surnames, like some progressives have done. It would instead require the demolition of

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the caste habitus by critically interrogating the caste privileges that surnames extend. We would need laws along with institutional and socio-cultural frameworks that guarantee equal treatment of all human beings in both private and public realms.

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